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PAREIDOLIC CINEMAS
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Solve the puzzle (Fig. 1) by reading through the essay for contextual help (clues not necessarily in order) or skip to the end to view all the clues (Fig. 6). Solution to the puzzle on page 87 of this issue.

Across (a)

Down (d)

What do you see in the grid above? Anything? We do, but we may not agree about what it is—or it may change depending on how we are feeling when you ask. As the old chestnut goes: what you see probably says more about you than it does about us.

1(a). Tendency to perceive connections among random things

28(a). Like faces in pareidolic illusions

29(d). Percept_ _ _

If you do see something—a face? a creature? a person sitting at their desk typing on the computer?—you are experiencing the very common human cognitive phenomenon of *pareidolia*. Pareidolia derives from the Greek *para*, meaning “beside, alongside, instead [of]” and *eidolon*, meaning “image, form, shape” and refers to a type of apophenia—a tendency to find meaningful patterns or connections in random things and has roused playful and popular fascination.¹ One can find photographs all over the internet featuring electrical outlets, vegetables, houses, and charred bread that appear to resemble human faces or other creatures. Pareidolia and other apophenic tendencies might underlie creative impulses or belief in the divine, but may also be exploited to sow seeds of division, conspiracy, and violence.²

15(a). Unsettled

9(d). Paraäc_ _ _mic

11(d). Where the action is

50(d). Doctoral degs.

The introduction of *paraäcademia* by the editors of this issue of *Portable Gray* cues us to consider academic disciplinary protocols as apophenic exercises in pattern recognition. We conceive of the *paraäcademic* as an invitation for eccentric intellectual gestures that center marginalized modes of knowledge-making. When existing operative approaches don't capture the connections among disciplinary fields or arenas of thought, or are unsuitable or inadequate to experiences of dispossession, colonization, or invisibilization, turning to the *paraäcadmic*—a cruciverbal game or pareidolic prompt—can be revelatory, perhaps even liberatory.

10(d). Illusion act

Pareidolia is related to other cognitive misperceptions of real stimuli or material events (as opposed to hallucinations) that include *completion illusions* and *affect illusions*. A completion illusion depends on the subject's inattention—humans tend to complete a familiar but not quite finished

pattern.³ Relevant to our disciplinary home (film/media), a kind of completion illusion is necessary for the perception of motion in cinema, which is composed of distinct frames in rapid succession.⁴ An affect illusion, alternatively, tends to arise when a subject's mood or state comes into play (a grieving person hearing the voice of the deceased in the thrumming of cicadas). As much film theory has concerned the phenomenological and unconscious mechanisms derived from psychoanalytic insights that shape film experience, pareidolic cinema describes a critical and creative approach that performs an experiment on our being, posing questions about how we might come to know ourselves and others through a cinematic experience.

43(d). It can be “mean” (Steyerl)

Out of curiosity, we asked ChatGPT about the relationship between pareidolia and cinema and the generative AI responded with seven items, the seventh of which was “experimental cinema”: “Some experimental filmmakers deliberately explore pareidolia as a theme or technique. They may use abstract visuals and sounds to encourage viewers to find patterns and meaning in the seemingly random, pushing the boundaries of traditional storytelling.” This seemed like an uncannily apt introduction to our research question—uncanny in Sigmund Freud's terms as “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.”⁵ The ChatGPT response is both familiar and strange. What the chatbot tells us confirms our hypothesis, but also provides a distorted reflection of all the scholarship that served as a training data set for the ML tool including the unattributed thoughts of, likely, our own friends and colleagues and weirder still, perhaps ourselves.⁶ It is, as Hito Steyerl observes of the image output of ML tools like Chat GPT, a “blurry output” that produces “mean images”—impossibly vague and simultaneously exclusive and discriminatory aggregations of existing data.⁷ The algorithm had no contact with a work of art directly and bypassed academic protocols of citation.⁸

14(a). “_ _ _ we there yet?”

Algorithms are notoriously biased toward those

who devise them and against those who fall outside of the expected parameters for which they are designed.⁹ Racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and all manner of latent and manifest phobia result in algorithmic errors; for instance, when a human is misrecognized as an animal, excessively targeted as criminal, or rejected as “dirty data.” In this context, Steyerl raises the prospect of “defiant apophenia.”¹⁰ A minoritized subject enacting defiant apophenia might strike back by poetically misreading a pattern of “inside” vs. “outside,” of the rule of law, of a border, of an archive.¹¹ In what follows, we demonstrate pareidolia to be a species of “defiant apophenia” as it is deployed in each of the films we consider. Our discernment of such instances of oppositional misperception of pattern or figure—obstructive illusions of pareidolic protest—follows visual and performance artist micha cárdenas's “algorithmic method of analysis,” a mode of analysis that works in the interest of people harmed by violent colonial processes.¹²

34(a). Eins und drei

58(a). Come together

As cárdenas points out in *Poetic Operations*, “[a]lgorithms are not new.”¹³ Like a recipe, an algorithm comprises a list of variables along with instructions for how those variables may interact (operations) in order to perform a particular task.¹⁴ cárdenas demonstrates the possibilities for extending the use of algorithms towards more “indeterminate, poetic applications” in order to counter their limited, biased, and destructively punishing uses. She deploys algorithmic analysis to effect an optical shift that moves beyond demands for representation and resists colonial assumptions.¹⁵ cardenas's poetic operations guide us to perceiving ways in which pareidolia might be implemented as a strategy in the three short experimental nonfiction films discussed below.

55(d). Revolver (2011–2022) director,

Cry_t_1Z_ ampbell

5(d). Anoushahpour's T_ _ Time_ _ at Separates Us (2022)

24(d). Sia's What R_ les_ he I_ visible (2022)

Taking its cue from the description of Crystal Z Campbell's short film, *Revolver* (2011–2022),

as “an archive of pareidolia,” this essay concerns a trio of films that variously activate pareidolic sensory deceptions as decolonial survival strategies.¹⁶ In *The Time that Separates Us* (2022) by Parastoo Anoushahpour, pareidolia is a perceptual artifact distorted through doubling. An ancient rock formation situated on the military border of Jordan and Palestine may appear (or disappear) depending on positionality as the film effects lenticular shifts in perceptions of border, nation, gender, and geography. In *What Rules the Invisible* (2022) by Tiffany Sia, pareidolia is an affect illusion of colonialism, conjuring ghostly apparitions to be discerned in archival tourist films of Hong Kong intercut with text translations of the artist's mother recalling colonial violence. In Campbell's film, pareidolia is leveraged as a kind of Rorschach test for projective analysis of personality, creativity, or bias most explicitly. Abstract and mirrored assemblages appear in a revolving frame and are paired with audio from an interview with a descendant of a community of Black migrants. All three films enact defiant apophenia to defend and affirm the complex and conflicted experiences of the colonized, exilic, immigrant, or otherwise oppressed.

18(a). Bone at the base of the skull

42(a). Eponymous exemplar of ambiguous perception developed by a Dane

The vase is a paradigm of relic forms—the epitome of antiquities. As a functional and decorative shape, it features anthropomorphic curves and perhaps shares ontological status with bones and other material human remains that serve as synecdochal evidence and devotional objects endowed with sacred powers across various belief systems. Vases in these terms may hold the political weight of bodies that have been given or denied citizenship status, subjected to mass death, or persecuted with an historical perseverance that might cast them as stubborn artifacts. The vase's contours carry the perceptual illusion of borders and belonging as the opposite of obdurate. Indeed, while the contestable status of borders has perpetuated conflict on a global scale, the discernment of borders is, in phenomenological terms,

flexible, moveable, and illusory.

The classic “Rubin’s vase” optical illusion of an ambiguous image can be interpreted either as “a vase in the center” or “two faces looking at each other.”¹⁷ The model for this illusion was created by the Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin in his work on figure-ground perception.¹⁸ Rubin discovered the basic principles of surroundedness, size, orientation, contrast, closure, symmetry, proximity, convexity, and parallelism.¹⁹ The cognitive process is also known as “border-ownership.”²⁰ The alternating spontaneous perception of face or vase has linked the discrimination of borders in Rubin’s illustration to the pareidolic tendency for subjective face perception.²¹ But the Rubin’s vase example also shows how humans instinctively decide which side of a border belongs to an object.

13(a). Owned

17(a). Wade noisily, as through a river

46(a). The Gaza_ _

Ambiguous artifacts and shifts in discernment affecting “border-ownership” as a perceptual problem sedimented in persistent violence underlie Anoushahpour’s 35-minute-long *The Time that Separates Us*. Reflecting on the work that Anoushahpour assembled from footage she shot and workshopped with a group of queer and female-identified collaborators during two trips to the Jordan River Valley, the filmmaker explains: “We wanted to give form to the border in different ways.”²³ A line of buoys strung by the Israeli government marks the border between Jordan and Palestine. Tourists enact baptismal ceremonies of purification in the now polluted waters of a redirected river. When we say that there is a border between one nation and another, we see something that on one level does not exist, yet has very real and tangible effects. When we say there is a nation, we see something that is invisible, and yet that constructs and deconstructs everyday lives. One person sees two faces while another person sees a vase. One person sees Israel while another sees Palestine. cárdenas points to lenticular shifts as a strategy for optical interruption and as a gesture to the “speculative possibilities of subversions.”²³

Here cárdenas is talking about gender regulations, but we can apply this thinking toward state regulations in general, and border regulations (border ownership) in particular. By presenting rock formations in the Jordan River Valley attributed to the petrified wife of Lot, doubled and from different vantage points, Anoushahpour produces lenticular shifts in perceiving this highly militarized zone that polices all forms of movement.

2(d). Survey (as for an opinion)

Like the vase that illustrates “border ownership,” the relics and artifacts in *The Time that Separates Us* pose questions about the assignment of boundaries. These relics can be surveyed not only in the presentation of the “site of Lot’s wife” and the colossal hand of Hercules in Amman, but in artifacts of media and the visualizing interfaces of analogue and digital technologies. The film includes location footage captured in various formats and rephotographed or recaptured in another format, reframed (sometimes quite literally, like by the visible marquis tool in a photo-editing application), or reoriented (turned on their side, like images within a text messaging feed on a phone), and creating generations of history in image artifacts (pixels, moiré, flicker, etc.) that point obliquely to generations of border conflicts and the limits of vision.

16(a). Valuable rock

The film begins in black and is accompanied by a voice-over in Arabic with text translation placing us in time: “It is the end of May and the hills of Amman are burning, sporadically.” An extended long shot follows—a blurry, pixelated image that suggests fire and a projectile on a hill. This projectile is possibly the rocky outcrop visible on the hills of Amman and mythologized as the site of Lot’s wife of scripture who, despite God’s instruction to not look back, glanced backward at the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and was instantly subject to the severe and unusual punishment of being mummified as a pillar of salt. The voice-over continues with words repeated in pairs: “slay, slay, capture, capture” and then in sequence, “clean, slay, capture, obtain, obtain,



steal, capture . . .” The doubling of the words immediately signals the doubling that is at the heart of the uncanny.

21(a). What “ought to have remained . . . hidden but has come to light”

The uncanny appears to haunt pareidolia. According to Freud by way of Schelling, the uncanny is what “ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light.”²⁴ Pareidolia sees what is secret and hidden in what appears to be innocuous, bereft of meaning or significance. That this pareidolic urge unveils what some may wish to keep concealed is the key to its political power.

57(a). Settled

3(d). City that lends it name to a set of accords

In the final credit sequence of *The Time that Separates Us*, superimposed over super-8 film footage of a Dead Sea landscape, is a list of locations for ancient sites and artifacts of mythological/biblical significance in the Jordan River Valley that are doubled across the contested and militarized borders of the occupied West Bank and Jordan. (see Fig. 2)

The unsettling tension of doubling proliferates in the region. The irresolvable doubleness of its artifacts suggests what Marjorie Rubright names a “doppelgänger dilemma”—entangled in paradoxes of identity that are never self-same, perpetually troubled by dissimilarities that are held in tension by

tropes of proximity.²⁵

40(d). Take to court

In her timely account of the figure of the doppelgänger as it bears on contemporary culture, Naomi Klein discusses the deeply destabilizing experience of being publicly confused with the conspiracy-touting “other Naomi” (Wolf). Following Freud, Klein confirms that “when a person is confronted by their doppelgänger, they become unfamiliar to themselves.”²⁶ She observes “doppelgänger politics” insinuating into every aspect of life in the state of Israel and occupied Palestine.²⁷ Both Klein’s writing and Anoushahpour’s film uncannily predict the doubling logic that has precipitated the violence that, since October 7, 2023, escalated into South Africa’s case against Israel for committing genocide.²⁸

25(d). Knowingness is sexy. The opposite of sexy is _ _ _ . Fran Lebowitz

48(d). Demolish, as a building

Another significant sequence in Anoushahpour’s short film leverages the potency of a charged image drawn from feminist history. Anoushahpour presents Lynda Benglis’s confrontational image from a 1974 advertisement in *Artforum* featuring the artist in sunglasses, naked and holding a double-ended dildo to her groin, taking possession of phallic power. Pinned to a wall by the filmmaker’s hands in overlapping layers

of the reproduced image scaled up and scaled down in size, tacked one on top of another, frames within frames. A woman's voice tells the story of Lot's daughters, typically the "end" of the story of Lot's wife though it is the beginning of the story of the Ammonites and Moabites, i.e., an origin story. The daughters take charge of their lineage. They assume phallic power, intoxicating, seducing, and fornicating with their father in order to impregnate themselves and thus assure the continuation of their bloodline.

54(d). Genetic "messenger," briefly

Anoushahpour reflects on her use of the Benglis image in the film:

I was thinking about an image possessing you. The phallic nature of the photograph is related to the powerful phallic presence of the rock that was supposed to be Lot's wife. I showed the image to the group, and we talked about how locations can become sites of origin for certain people. Narratives of belonging or the right to belong emerge from these stories, along with the right to take, to possess and control.²⁹

As with cases of pareidolia, Anoushahpour's film asks whether images possess the viewer or the viewer possesses the image? Does the image make the viewer see something that purportedly isn't there, or is the viewer taking control of the image, and producing an unseen image where it is not? Is the pillar of salt an artifact of misogyny or a speculative monument to other possible histories that vibrate on the edges of the shape—figure or ground? Rather than delivering a straightforward documentation or explanation of sacred sites, Anoushahpour gives her collaborators the opportunity to take charge of the charged sites. She offers not a fixed perspective but a feminist, decolonial movement beyond binaries of visible/invisible.

30(d). ___om and Gomorrah

In Martin Harries's *Forgetting Lot's Wife*,

the author poses a theory of "destructive spectatorship" through the mythology of Lot's wife and its resurfacing in 20th-century works of art that address themes of historical retrospection with "the notion that the sight of historical catastrophe can destroy the spectator."³⁰ But the self-destructive nature of retrospection is simultaneously a possibility for regeneration.³¹ *The Time that Separates Us* engages with willful "looking back" at a feminist image and its resonance (Benglis). The spectator looks again at the site that turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt, looks back at Benglis's provocation, and is in some sense destroyed. A sense of narrative stability collapses; a particular rendition of history, geography, and politics is put to ruin. "At every site, in every tale, there are always two nations deciding what is the truth," Anoushahpour reflects.³² Pareidolia speaks to the question of who decides what is truth, who decides what can be discerned, what is legitimately identifiable.

21(d). Methods

32(d). Allow

19(d). "Make me ___ with everything"

23(d). Blow it

In mathematics, it is axiomatic that all operations must be reversible or undo-able.³³ Zero has no multiplicative inverse and "any attempt to define a real number as the multiplicative inverse of 0 would result in the contradiction $0=1$."³⁴ Hence, it is a rule in math to never divide by zero.³⁵ We offer this mathematical axiom in the spirit of algorithmic analysis to posit that the riddle embedded in the title of Sia's film, *What Rules the Invisible*, is a question of allowable operations. In mathematical terms, the answer to the question of "what rules the invisible?" is "undefined" like $1/0$. What are the rules for what cannot be seen? In Sia's film, we perceive a pareidolic cinematic method for projecting invisible specters as affective illusions.

51(a). ___ in "invisible"

56(a). Garment also known as a "quipao," cheo_ s_m

37(d). Chinese commodity at center of British colonial rule

49(d). Treats, as a minor physical trauma



Experiences of trauma, loss, and anxiety might excite a hyperactive pareidolic tendency or sensitivity to the supernatural.³⁶ That is, they might account for one seeing or hearing ghosts. Sia's *What Rules the Invisible* is essentially a ghost story about the colonial haunting of Hong Kong. From the perspective of the colonial or postcolonial uncanny, Hong Kong was a haunted or ghostly double of Great Britain, or Japan during its four-year occupation, and now China.

In just under ten minutes, *What Rules the Invisible* travels across decades through amateur travelogue footage of Hong Kong, intercut with on-screen text transcribing an interview with Sia's mother who recalls poverty and colonial violence in the postwar era. None of the images are directly illustrative of the intertitles, nor is the sound synchronous with the image, as we will elaborate below. This is to say that the image, textual, and audio tracks bear a loose relation to each other as opposed to a more conventional one-to-one relation. While concurrent, they function somewhat independently. This state of simultaneity and suspension is conducive to pareidolic imaginings wherein the viewer/listener/reader is invited to formulate connections or invent meanings.

Sia describes her film as a kind of projective test for the photographer in that it "reveals more about the traveler himself," for instance, as it lingers on the curves of a woman wearing the figure-fitting traditional

cheongsam. The footage bears the artifacts of translation (from analogue to digital) that appear as interlaced scanning lines—ghostly artifacts—horizontal bars that glitch out of alignment (Fig. 3). Of course the film is also a projective test for the maker and the viewer—like the inkblot that emerges more explicitly in Campbell's film—who choose to read meanings and connections into the images that the original photographers did not necessarily intend.

In her synopsis of the film, Sia notes that "the sojourner's gaze—distanced, distorted and even voyeuristic—shows tropes and patterns."³⁷ It searches for patterns in the urban fray of Hong Kong. But can a place of "no place"—as Sia's circuitous family history is described by historian Gordon Chang—hold any patterns other than that of dispersal, of restless comings and goings?³⁸ How can one find a pattern in the disappeared, the dispossessed, the invisible?

20(d). Unceded land of the Haudenosaunee: Abbr.

8(d). What "y" often becomes when pluralized "No place" is a term that can be applied to colonial and postcolonial port cities like Hong Kong, Shanghai, New York.³⁹ In her recent book, *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries*, Sia recognizes "no place" in the photographs of Vietnamese-born artist, An-My Lê, particularly the *Việt Nam* series which enacts a "double gaze" that "forecloses the possibility

Fig. 3. Tiffany Sia, *What Rules the Invisible*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and FELIX GAUDLITZ, Vienna, and Maxwell Graham, New York.

of unity, resolution, or completion.”⁴⁰ This double gaze operates like a Rubin’s vase, like pareidolia, in defying resolution. The uncanny double gaze for the exile, as Edward Said points out, is plural.⁴¹ The exile suffers from contrapuntal vision. *What Rules the Invisible* is characterized by this migratory gaze that is often the result of colonial pressures.

27(a). Clouzot thriller, “Quai _ Orfèvres” (1947)
22(d). Tool one might use to extract grain from excrement (not optimal)?

47(d). The figure of one who may be malnourished

Sia studies Lè’s photographs through a concept of elliptical montage that asks viewers to conceive of what takes place invisibly between the still images. Elliptical montage can strike back against the ‘rules’ of invisibility in a defiant apophenic gesture. It can be read as a pareidolic approach to imagining what doesn’t exist between the frames of *What Rules the Invisible*. Here we enter undefined territory—as we would if dividing by zero—where we encounter images Sia does not show (but described in intertitles), of starved people hunting for bits of grain in Japanese military horse shit, of the haunted Tsim Sha Tsui Police Station, of filthy communal toilet pails. Between the frames we hear a persistent melody of cicadas. Within the algorithm of *What Rules the Invisible*, the cicadas are the constant. Images may be missing, but the constant insect whine remains, following the cyclical rule of emergence every May.

41(a). Nautical tethering point
6(d). Palindromic language suffix
31(d). History’s dust goes here

Sia describes potential visibility and invisibility as two sides of a coin, which implies that one or the other side may face you, but the opposing side is always present, backing it up.⁴² The model of Rubin’s vase pushes this metaphor further, where visibility and invisibility co-exist depending upon perspective, flipping without moving, balanced on the coin’s edge of our own perception. Rubin’s vase, with its troubling neuropsychological premise of “border ownership” as an operation, is also tangled in

histories of asymmetry, coercion, and ruinous domination.⁴³

To see an image where it doesn’t exist Sia summons the blank image or the black image as an alternative to visibility limited to identity (Asian American or colonial subject). The black image plays a rather outsized role in *What Rules the Invisible*, serving as a pareidolic plane upon which to project one’s own imaginings. In the span of 9.5 minutes, there are fourteen intertitles on a black screen, which amounts to perhaps close to two minutes, or approximately one-fifth of the screen time. Notably at just over the eight-minute mark, an eight-second black screen is sustained, at first only accompanied by the sound of cicadas that has recurred throughout the film. Eight seconds may seem short, but it feels like a gaping hole in a film of such brevity and concision. The arresting absence of a conventional visual image punctuates the first and only occurrence of a voice, a signal of embodiment without representation. Sia’s mother sings a Cantonese folk song as if to say that the memories for which there are no images are preserved in music. Sound may be more difficult to co-opt and exploit, as it always already has a flexible, untethered quality that lends itself to auditory pareidolia in its openness to interpretation. The cicadas, for instance, which may be the only sound occupying the track aside from the singular moment of song and the murmur of traffic, can be heard simply as hissing. This sound triggers an affect illusion that leads us to search for an image in our minds to cohere with the nonvisualized hum. Sound, especially asynchronous sound, is easily unplaceable; its nomadic quality is fitting for a film about the migration spurred by a colonial past.

44(d). Like some accents
46(d). Electronic synchronizing device: Abbr.
52(d). Oscillation rates between audio and infrared: Abbr.

Non-synchronous sound may be a privileged space for pareidolia. Deviating from temporal matching, non-synchronous sound resonates both aesthetically and thematically as unfixed and affective. Each of our selected films contains no lip sync and very little, if any, synchronous sound. Asynchrony also



dislocates the authority of any individual speaking voice which, in the history of cinema as a colonial technology of modernity, is overdetermined as Western, white, and male. We may ponder whether non-synchronous sound prompts pareidolia, or whether cinematic pareidolia takes place in the gap between image and non-synchronous sound. The relationship between sound and image in cinema is always to a degree apophonic, that is, there is a tendency to perceive a connection between sound and image which are not necessarily related. Most of us know by now through lip syncing and foley that the synchronous relationship that we perceive as natural reality in cinema is a construction. But pareidolic cinema highlights the discontinuities and dissociations between image and sound, uncovering new meanings.⁴⁴

53(d). “Black gold”

Revolver opens with the flashed ends of 16mm film. Something is moved into the frame—squared off from an overhead angle—and pushed by an archivist’s gloved hands. The abstract shape in the image appears mirrored using an editing software distort effect and resembles the iconic symmetrical ink blots of a Rorschach test. A bell rings, as if indicating a test prompt. Thumping electronic-industrial music is heard. The image swallows into itself at the center line, an uncanny artifact of a

digital mirror filter. The viewer tries to place the images and find connections between the audio and image. The images never resolve into a recognizable shape. The listener perceives moments of audio, but the fidelity of the voiced narration seems to disrupt a close listening.

52(a). Big name in blots

28(d). Ink from a pen before forming a blot
 According to the press release for Campbell’s 2023 Artists Space (New York, NY) exhibition, the visual abstractions in *Revolver* are inspired by a visit the artist made to the Herman Rorschach archive in Switzerland, the namesake of the inkblot tests.⁴⁵ Rorschach’s inkblot test emerged in 1921 at the moment of modernism’s zenith and by WWII, the test had become a prominent diagnostic measure and a kind of “‘visual variation on Freud’s verbal technique’ of prompting free association.”⁴⁶ It has been dismissed as pseudoscience (*paraacademia*), “little more scientific than palm reading,” and delegitimized for the tendency of readings to say more about the examiners than the subjects, but defended as recently as 2015 in a broad study by the American Psychological Association.⁴⁷

In *Tripping on the Color Line: Black-White Multiracial Families in a Racially Divided World*, Heather Dalmage writes of Black bodies functioning as “the nation’s racial Rorschach tests.”⁴⁸ As Dalmage rightly argues, bodies

and identities, especially those that are ambiguous, are interpreted and explained just as abstract images are in Rorschach tests. This connection is further verified as projective tests like Rorschach's were inventions of post-Enlightenment Europe utilized to assess "mental deficiencies," which culminated in the field of eugenics. As such, they continue to reflect and enforce discrimination and hierarchical sorting along axes of religion, nation, race, sex, and ability.⁴⁹ Perhaps drawn to what the tests say about the nation's racism, Campbell presents her 24 digitized film images as homage to Rorschach's ten ink blots.

10(a). Stain

39 (d). Woolf's "___ Dalloway"

In her examination of modernist pareidolia in inkblots, Emily James maintains that they operate as "covert sites of women's authorship and graphic imagination."⁵⁰ She looks to Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf for examples of how women engage "suspect creativity" through blotting techniques.⁵¹ We look to Campbell, Sia, and Anoushahpour as contemporary examples of women and gender non-conforming people of color who employ pareidolia in a similar vein, as a means of enacting a counter-creativity, one that compels its viewers to show their "true colors." The blot, as James tells us, is a contronym or enantiadrome, and is "beset by doubleness."⁵² A contronym is both a thing and its opposite, and enantiadromia signals a tendency for a thing to change to its opposite. The verb "blot" can mean "to absorb" or "to stain." The blot has been tied to creativity and imagination, but also to criminality and mistakes (police plotters, blotting paper). Inkblots cannot help but invite pareidolia, which shares its contronymic and enantiadromiac characteristics. Following Freud's etymological unraveling of *Heimlich*, in which he discovers that *Heimlich* (homey, friendly, familiar) evolves to mean exactly its opposite, *Unheimlich* (strange, scary, secret), we can understand the inkblot which inspires pareidolia as uncanny.⁵³ James finds pareidolia's etymology suggestive of a "haunted mirror image" that could not be better represented than in Campbell's digitally manipulated blot imagery originating from

"undisclosed personal artifacts, objects, and traces of their own life."⁵⁴ (see Fig. 4)

33(a). Origin or source

35(a). Formal charges for a crime

39(a). Familiar address to Angela Bates if she were your teacher

45(a). 1965 Freedom March city

Each of the films we examine is an origin story or contains an origin story. Their pareidolic strategy is to discern in this familiar pattern a secret or hidden alternate truth, an uncanny double, which is presented to us as a test, not so much for us to solve, as for us to sit with the complexity. The exilic, immigrant, outsider, sojourner's gaze looks back toward their conflicted origins and does not see a simple truth. Their vision is barred—they are turned to salt, invisibilized, exiled, murdered—they are told there is nothing to see or nothing exists, as in scenes of oppressive visuality that Nicholas Mirzhoeff describes when police officers shuttle passersby to bypass police violence.⁵⁵ In *Revolver* the featured speaker, historian Angela Bates, is a living descendent of the Black settlers of Nicodemus, known as "Exodusters," who fled the South in the 1870s to Kansas by the thousands. Freed slaves turned tenant farmers, they found themselves not free in the South and remained in economic and political bondage.⁵⁶ Connecting *Revolver* to *The Time that Separates Us*, Exodusters connected their lineage to ancient Israelites.

4(d). Promos

12(d). Mementos

At the Flaherty seminar where Campbell screened *Revolver*, they remarked that during the prolonged conversation with Bates, they felt like they were in a dream. The space of "vision and reverie" and "black interiority" that Campbell creates in *Revolver* is a dream space that was integral to the Continents of Drifting Clouds seminar curated by Almudena Escobar López and Sky Hopinka.⁵⁷ Anoushahpour, Sia, and Campbell were all featured filmmakers in the 67th Flaherty Film Seminar, selected for their ability to detect alternate meanings in the drifting clouds where, in Escobar López and Hopinka's words, "the boundaries and borders of what

we've been taught to understand as proper or traditional no longer hold meaning."⁵⁸ This "proper" meaning, they continue, is "only an extraction" that adheres to the logic of settler colonialism.⁵⁹ Instead, pareidolic cinema works against the conventions of documentary narrativity to forge novel myths, disrupted stories of unsettled origins, or suspended, abstracted, and fragmented dreams.

1(d). Egyptian bull deity that symbolizes fertility and strength in war

In her recollections, Bates describes a recurrent dream. A white horse is chasing the dreamer, whom the film viewers never see, but whom we know to be a Black woman (an Exoduster descendent). "I don't know why you've been running all these years. You're the only one that can ride me," the horse says to her telepathically. The horse then turns into a Pegasus and the two of them go flying. A dream is a wish. The wish is to ride the white horse. But riding can be an ambiguous action in terms of authority and control. Who is riding whom? The white horse chases but then carries Bates who, in her dream, seems to have some authority. Viewing *Revolver* we become dream interpreters. Pareidolia is akin to dream interpretation, reading signs and meanings into seemingly random dream material.

26(a). It comes from the heart

59(a). Laxity

This mode of dream analysis departs from the Freudian tradition in which race and class are often elided. In contrast, Campbell produces what they call a "personal and political psychic geography" that mines the psychic archive of the historian of Nicodemus, an archive that has long been rendered "underloved," as Campbell titles the installation iteration of *Revolver*.⁶⁰ Instead of rehearsing the standard questions a journalist or documentarian might pose, Campbell allows Bates the freedom of spontaneous reverie. This slackness is not without care. It is a kind of care that welcomes streams of consciousness or even unconsciousness. It may be a way of tending to the pedestrian details that fail to be recorded in official histories. That is to say, attending to the unrehearsed stories that unravel as if one were sitting with

a companion at the kitchen table or in the passenger seat as they freely associate on a long drive, is an act of love. Campbell induces the kind of free association for which the Rorschach test was intended. We hear such associative material in a car ride monologue:

My parents bought this from a cousin of mine back in the late '70s . . . But it's been owned by Blacks ever since homesteading. From here, from this point, fencepost all the way up to that one up there, basically that's a quarter of a mile, and a quarter of mile back to the highway, this is forty acres. Forty acres is a quarter of a mile square.

A bell dings. The time is up. The test is over. We don't necessarily know what the questions were—we haven't heard any. But we know some answers. One answer is that Black folks have sustained a life in this small Kansas town, one that may be only partially legible to outsiders, but that has earned them a rich history in which intimates have and continue to find succor.

7(d). Intelligence-gathering org.

To defy the mathematical axiom of never dividing by zero would lead to the conclusion that all numbers are the same, a conclusion that has metaphysical implications of unification, that everything is equal to everything. Mathematician Steven Strogatz dismisses this thought experiment as one that ultimately gets you nowhere. However, he grants that the impulse to do so is a "unifying impulse" which counterbalances a "diversifying impulse."⁶¹ In scientific inquiry, there is a need for both unifiers and diversifiers. If you are all about diversity, you don't perceive patterns, and if you are all about unity, you don't see richness and differentiation.

As a theory, pareidolia is a little like dividing by zero. It kind of gets you nowhere, but beautifully so. Pareidolia asks us to perceive patterns as a unifying theory might, yet it also follows the diversifying impulse. We can see it as a Rubin's vase, which presents the viewer with a task and a question—who or what owns the border? But maybe we can hold two things in our mind's eye at once. We need both: unity and differentiation. The films of Anoushahpour, Sia, and Campbell

respectively hold onto both tendencies in ways that, perhaps, are meant to perplex. Their main purpose may be to dislodge claims that there is nothing to see here.

Dogged by the uncanny doublings of pareidolia, we decided to subject ourselves to a projective analysis and to produce our own Rubin's vase (Fig. 5). We are a double to each other in less than visible ways. No one could discern from our outward appearances that we both studied at the University of Iowa and were mentored by the same experimental filmmaker, that we both came to New York City and continued our esoteric film education at the now defunct, legendary Collective for Living Cinema. In our Rubin's vase, our profiles are dissimilar, giving asymmetric shape to the vessel we house between our gaze. Together we have cobbled together a disunified theory of pareidolia that asks you, the viewer, not to find what you are looking for or even to discover something new and unexpected, but to hold as many perspectives in your mind as you can encompass.



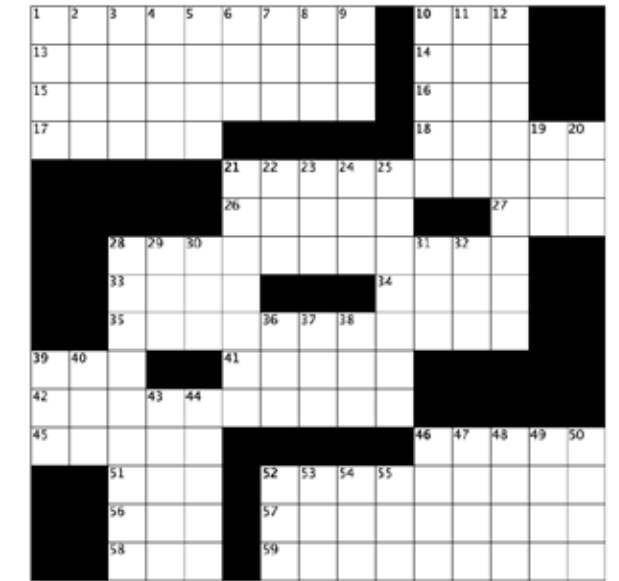
Fig. 5. *Lin-Friedling Rubin's vase maquette* (Melissa Friedling + Lana Lin, 2024). Glazed ceramic stoneware. 7.5 inches x 6 inches x 3 inches. Courtesy of the artists.

ACROSS

1. Tendency to perceive connections among random things
10. Stain
13. Owned
14. "___ we there yet?"
15. Unsettled
16. Valuable rock
17. Wade noisily, as through a river
18. Bone at the base of the skull
21. What "ought to have remained ... hidden but has come to light"
26. It comes from the heart
27. Clouzot thriller, "Quai _ Orfèvres" (1947)
28. Like faces in pareidolic illusions
33. Origin or source
34. Eins und drei
35. Formal charges for a crime
39. Familiar address to Angela Bates if she were your 3rd grade teacher?
41. Nautical tethering point
42. Eponymous exemplar of ambiguous perception developed by a Dane
45. 1965 Freedom March city
46. The Gaza__
51. ___ in "Invisible"
52. Big name in blots
56. Garment also know as a "quipao," cheo__s_m
57. Settled
58. Come together
59. Laxity

DOWN

1. Egyptian bull deity that symbolizes fertility and strength in war
2. Survey (as for an opinion)
3. City that lends its name to a set of accords
4. Promos
5. Anoushahpour's "T__ Time __at Separates Us" (2022)



6. Palindromic language suffix
7. Intelligence-gathering org.
8. What "y" often becomes when pluralized
9. Paraäc__mic
10. Illusion act
11. Where the action is
12. Mementos
19. "Make me ___ with everything"
20. Unceded land of the Haudenosaunee: Abbr.
21. Methods
22. Tool one might use to extract grain from excrement (not optimal)?
23. Blow it
24. Sia's "What R__les _he l__visible" (2022)
25. Knowingness is sexy. The opposite of sexy is ___. Fran Lebowitz
28. Ink from a pen before forming a blot
29. Percept__
30. ___om and Gomorrah suffix
31. History's dust goes here
32. Allow
36. XXXI x V
37. Chinese commodity at center of British colonial rule
38. Advanced degs.
39. Woolf's "___ Dalloway"
40. Take to court
43. It can be "mean" (Steyerl)
44. Like some accents
46. Electronic synchronizing device: Abbr.
47. The figure of one who may be malnourished
48. Demolish, as a building
49. Treats, as a minor physical trauma
50. Doctoral degs.
52. Oscillation rates between audio and infrared: Abbr.
53. "Black gold"
54. Genetic "messenger," briefly
55. "Revolver" (2011-2022) director, Cry_t_l Z __ampbell

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1 Cornelia Kaufmann et al., “Phenomenal Insight: Pareidolia—I see?” *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 53, no. 1 (January 2019): 89.

2 For example, the size of a crowd at a protest or inauguration. As Hito Steyerl observes, “apophenia happens when narrative breaks down and causality has to be recognized—or invented—across a cacophony of spam, spin, fake, and gadget chatter.” See Hito Steyerl, “A Sea of Data: Pattern Recognition and Corporate Animism (Forked Version),” in *Pattern Discrimination*, ed. Clemens Apprich et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 15.

3 Femi Oyeboode, *Symptoms in the Mind: Textbook of Descriptive Psychopathology* (Edinburgh: Saunders Elsevier, 2015), 94.

4 38(d). Advanced degs. The phenomenon attributed to apparent movement was introduced by German gestalt psychologists, most notably by Max Wertheimer (who described the Phi Phenomenon), between 1913 and 1915. We are both faculty in the MA program in Media Studies in the School of Media Studies at The New School in New York, NY, where, as it happens, Max Wertheimer accepted an invitation in 1933 to serve as faculty as part of its University in Exile and where he taught through the last decade of his life. See Mitchell G. Ash, “Max Wertheimer’s University Career in Germany,” *Psychological Research* 51, (September 1989): 52–57.

5 Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 124.

6 We (the authors) are both experimental filmmakers and have also written about experimental cinematic practices in respective published works.

7 “Mean” in all senses of the word, according to Steyerl, i.e., the aggregating process for arriving at a common or average (as in a statistical mean); of meager or shabby origins (mean beginnings); cruel and exclusionary (behavior that is mean). See Hito Steyerl, “Mean Images,” *New Left Review* 140/141, (March and June 2023): 82–97, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/iii40/articles/hito-steyerl-mean-images>.

8 36(d). XXXI x V

9 See, for example, Julia Angwin, “Make Algorithms Accountable,” *The New York Times*, August 1, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/01/opinion/make-algorithms-accountable.html>; Florian Cramer, “Crapularity Hermeneutics: Interpretation as the Blind Spot of Analytics, Artificial Intelligence, and Other Algorithmic Producers of the Postapocalyptic Present,” in *Pattern Discrimination*, ed. Clemens Apprich et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 23–58.

10 Steyerl, “A Sea of Data,” 17.

11 Steyerl offers an example of “defiant apophenia” in the context of British pop star, George Michael’s, 1998 arrest after being entrapped by a cop in a Los Angeles public men’s bathroom for “lewd” behavior. Steyerl reads this as the “Faith” singer’s misinterpretation of a pattern—mistaking the police officer for a lover and “an act of apophenia if there ever was one” (16). Following the incident and the public ‘outing’ that his arrest precipitated, Michael released a video called “Outside” in which a men’s toilet becomes a celebratory dance floor and, Steyerl notes, brilliantly exemplifies an “act of defiant apophenia” (17). See Steyerl, “A Sea of Data.”

12 micha cárdenas, *Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).

13 *Ibid.*, 7.

14 *Ibid.*, 15.

15 *Ibid.*, 25.

16 “Revolver,” Berlinale, accessed January 19, 2024, <https://www.berlinale.de/en/2023/programme/202302310.html>.

17 Daiki Matsumoto et al., “Simulation of the Cognitive Process in Looking at Rubin’s Vase,” *Procedia Computer Science* 123, (2018), 265.

18 Edgar Rubin, *Synsoplevede figurer, studier i psykologisk analyse* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1915).

19 Baingio Pinna et al., “A New Principle of Figure-ground Segregation: The Accentuation,” *Vision Research* 143, (February 2018): 9–25.

20 Tom P. Franken and John H. Reynolds, “Columnar Processing of Border Ownership in Primate Visual Cortex,” *eLife*, November 30, 2021.

21 Xiaogang Wang et al., “Category Selectivity of Human Visual Cortex in Perception of Rubin Face–Vase Illusion,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 8, (September 2017).

22 Parastoo Anoushahpour, “An Interview with Parastoo Anoushahpour on Sexuality, Identity, and Language,” interview by Mike Hoolboom, *Point of View Magazine*, September 14, 2022, <https://povmagazine.com/an-interview-with-parastoo-anoushahpour-on-sexuality-identity-and-language/>.

23 cárdenas, *Poetic Operations*, 2.

24 Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917–1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey, 223.

25 Marjorie Rubright, *Doppelgänger Dilemmas: Anglo-Dutch Relations in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 3.

26 Naomi Klein, *Doppelgänger: A Trip*

into the Mirror World (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023), 332.

27 *Ibid.*, 211.

28 Klein arrives at an understanding of “Doppelgänger politics” by way of scholar, Caroline Rooney, who has specified the complex doubled logic to the state of Israel, occupying the space of both victim and perpetrator and Klein pointedly observes, as “colonialism framed as reparations for genocide” (301).

29 Anoushahpour, interview.

30 Martin Harries, *Forgetting Lot’s Wife: On Destructive Spectatorship* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 1.

31 *Ibid.*, 15–16.

32 Anoushahpour, interview.

33 If you start with 10 and divide by 5, you get 2. And you can go from 2 and multiply by 5 to get back to 10. However, if you multiply 10 by 0 you get zero and there is no way to get back to 10.

34 Michael J. Neely, “Why We Cannot Divide by Zero,” <https://ee.usc.edu/stochastic-nets/docs/divide-by-zero.pdf>.

35 YouTubers gleefully demonstrate this by sending mechanical calculators into self-destructive infinite loops. See for example,

Impaler The Vlad, “What Happens When You Divide by Zero on Mechanical Calculator,” posted October 31, 2016, YouTube, 0:45.

36 An affect illusion is a related pareidolic response that can only be understood in the context of a prevailing mood and when the perception of everyday objects may be altered by feelings and thoughts. In the context of bereavement, for example, a searching impulse may lead to the momentary recognition of a recently deceased loved one in a crowd—an illusion that may dissipate on closer examination. See Oyeboode, *Symptoms in the Mind*, 94.

37 Program 03: Sunday June 26. See “The 67th Flaherty Film Seminar: Continents of Drifting Clouds, June 25–July 1 2022,” The Flaherty, accessed January 19, 2024, <https://theflaherty.org/clouds-programs>.

38 Tiffany Sia, *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries* (New York: Primary Information, 2024), 138.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*, 140.

41 *Ibid.*, 146.

42 *Ibid.*, 127.

43 Franken and Reynolds, “Columnar Processing.”

44 An interesting related phenomenon is the “McGurk effect” as

explained and demonstrated by artist Jules Gimbrone. In a 1976 paper for *Nature* researcher psychologists Harry McGurk and John MacDonald outline the ways in which vision influences speech perception. They demonstrate that when a subject is presented with contradictory visual and auditory linguistic content (video of lips speaking words overdubbed with different words), there is a tendency to “hear” incorrect audio. McGurk and MacDonald relate this illusion phenomenon to the perception of a “third sound”—and what Gimbrone describes as a non-binary type of perceiving, akin to what he identifies as “Trans-Sensing Modalities.” See Harry McGurk and John MacDonald, “Hearing Lips and Seeing Voices,” *Nature* 264, (1976): 746–748; Jules Gimbrone, “Touching a Third Sound: Trans-Sensing in a World of Deepfakes,” *Walker*, May 16, 2019, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/jules-gimbrone-trans-sensing-in-a-world-of-visual-dominance>.

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“Crystal Z Campbell: Ode to the Underloved,” Artists Space, accessed January 19, 2024, <https://artistspace.org/exhibitions/crystal-z-campbell>.

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James Geary quoted in Emily James, “The Modernist Inkblot,” 303. Rorschach was a contemporary and himself a keen listener of Sigmund Freud’s developing ideas, and in 1911 introduced his inkblots as an analytical tool to investigate personality differences related to fantasy and imagination. In June 1921, Rorschach published his *Psychodiagnostik* in which he defined the foundations of his projective test but was unable to develop further since he died only

nine months after its publication. See Ricardo Vieira Teles Filho, “Hermann Rorschach: From klecksography to psychiatry,” *Dementia & Neuropsychologia* 14, no 1 (March 2020): 81.

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Thomas Stephens, “A Blot on the Scientific Landscape,” SWI, January 11, 2008, https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/hermann-rorschach_a-blot-on-the-scientific-landscape/6358258; Arthur Kornhauser, “Replies of Psychologists to a Short Questionnaire on Mental Test Developments, Personality Inventories, and the Rorschach Test,” *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 5, no 1 (April 1945): 3–15; James M. Wood et al., “A Second Look at the Validity of Widely Used Rorschach Indices: Comment on Mihura, Meyer, Dumitrascu, and Bombel (2013),” *Psychological Bulletin* 141, no 1 (January 2015): 236–249.

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Heather M. Dalmage, *Tripping on the Color Line: Black-White Multiracial Families in a Racially Divided World* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 105–129.

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See, for example, Michael E. Staub, *The Mismeasure of Minds: Debating Race and Intelligence Between Brown and The Bell Curve* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Yarden Katz, “Intelligence Under Racial Capitalism: From Eugenics to Standardized Testing and Online Learning,” *Monthly Review* 74, no 4 (September 2022): 32–52; Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2008); Alexandra M. Stern, *Eugenic*

Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

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James, “The Modernist Inkblot,” 305.

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Ibid.

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Ibid., 299.

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Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917–1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey, 221–226.

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Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).

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Crystal Z. Campbell, “Session 10” (archived audio recording of discussion session), June 29, 2022, in the 67th Flaherty Film Seminar: Continents of Drifting Clouds, Colgate University, Hamilton, NY, MP3 audio, 16:00.

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January 19, 2024, <https://theflaherty.org/2022-seminar-online>.

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Ibid.

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Artists Space, “Crystal Z Campbell: Ode to the Underloved.”

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Matthew Kielty, prod., “Zeroworld,” December 29, 2023, in *Radiolab*, podcast, <https://radiolab.org/podcast/zeroworld>.